

“TOO CLOSE TO HOME”

1.

Earlier in his career, on a March afternoon not quite hot enough to keep people off the streets, Detective Mike Verlaine, driving east through downtown at the wheel of an unmarked black Dodge, would have been quick to note the juxtapositions that for years made Los Angeles an endless source of fascination for him. But then, earlier in his career Mike Verlaine would also have had clearer eyes through which to sneak glances at City Hall and the Court House, where he had spent so many of his working hours, then moments later at the shops, restaurants and bars he had long patronized in Little Tokyo.

Even just a year or two before, instead of fighting off both a hangover and the pall that engulfed him, there would have been a reasonable chance that Mike Verlaine might have benefited from a decent night's sleep, then started his morning with a three-mile run and a bowl of oatmeal and fruit, or alternatively an hour at the gym followed by a protein shake. But those days seemed like ancient history as the dented Dodge crossed Alameda, with its newly-constructed gated apartment complex built in yet another futile attempt to convince executives to forgo a Freeway commute after work. If Verlaine was still to some degree a creature of habit, it was of different, less socially acceptable habits – habits that no longer engendered within him the same display of curiosity or interest as the unmarked car continued to travel east into a realm where industry, artists' lofts, and the homeless somehow managed to coexist with only sporadic eruptions of any consequence.

With a frown toward his longtime partner, Kenny Clarke, a black guy who looked like

he could still go ten rounds as a middleweight, and who was at that very moment replacing Bobby “Blue” Bland’s “Two Steps From The Blues,” a CD held in high esteem by Verlaine, with some of his own favorite George Clinton funk, Verlaine swung the car onto the 1st Street Bridge, a structure that provided entry into what almost seemed to be another country.

Instantly the reigning culture, as seen on billboards, murals, and graffiti, and as heard thanks to the music and the voices proliferating on streets with nearly three times as much foot traffic, was Latino rather than Anglo. It was Mexican fusion, East L.A. style: Chicanos and new arrivals, *ninos* and *abuelos*, hip-hop and mariachis. Past housing projects, bars, and beauty salons went the Dodge, then on into the heart of the section known as Boyle Heights. There, on streets that once housed L.A.’s Jewish community before its migration westward, the Dodge passed places as disparate as Homegirls Café, created by Father Gregory Boyle to give second chances to female gang members; and Birreria Jalisco, with its *gringo*-repelling menu of goat (and only goat) multiple ways, but never *arroz o frijoles*; until it neared a surprisingly sophisticated establishment called La Serenata de Garibaldi.

No one on that part of the *calle*, as it was known locally – not the *vatos*, not the shoppers, not the new wave of immigrants (legal or otherwise) – seemed the least bit happy when the Dodge pulled up in front of a fire hydrant and out stepped its two occupants. But in truth the detectives were not exactly thrilled to be there either. For them this was not the equivalent of a trip to the track, or a stop for a game of 9-ball at a favorite pool hall. This was work, pure and simple, though from experience they expected it to be not the least bit pure, and anything but simple.

In the lull between lunch and dinner, the always tranquil La Serenata seemed even more quiet and serene than usual, except for a table near the rear, where a collection of hard cases could be found drinking Mescal along with bottles of Negra Modelo.

Flashing badges, the two detectives, who may well have been the only non-Latinos not merely on the premises, but arguably in the entire neighborhood, approached with the closest thing to smiles they could muster given the circumstances and the surroundings.

“*Amigos, como esta?*” Verlaine asked in perfect homeboy Spanish, as though attempting to sound jaunty.

The guys seated around the table, especially a tattooed monster who went by the name of Chino, and a twenty-something wiseass named Manny Lunetta, were not, however, the least bit interested in buying into jauntiness.

“Eat shit with your *como esta*,” Manny muttered before disdainfully chug-a-lugging a bottle of dark beer, then letting loose with a bodacious burp that drew snickers from his posse.

“I’m trying to be nice,” Verlaine asserted with only a measure of sincerity. “You know, ask what’s new, how you are, what’s going on at home – that kind of shit.”

“Got questions?” Manny responded, looking first at Verlaine, then turning to the huge sidekick seated beside him at the table. “Tell him, Chino.”

“See his fuckin’ lawyer,” Chino uttered as though having just invented a phrase he clearly cherished.

Ignoring Chino, Verlaine studied Manny Lunetta for a moment through eyes that seemed even more bloodshot than before.

“Big man, huh, with all your *compadres* around?”

“Better fuckin’ believe it.”

Shaking his head, Verlaine turned to his partner.

“Read this piece of shit his rights,” he said to Kenny Clarke in no uncertain terms.

Moments later a large black Mercedes without the slightest trace of grime, grease, dirt, or dust pulled up in front of La Serenata, and out from the back seat stepped an authoritative

well-dressed man known to command what was referred to in that particular part of the world as *respect*. With something akin to a wave here, plus a half-smile or nod there, Anthony Lunetta waited for his driver, Ernie Borjas, to join him, then started toward the restaurant just as out through the front door stepped Verlaine and Clarke, together with an unhappily handcuffed Manny Lunetta.

Instantly, all eyes met.

“Say goodbye to your nephew *The Torch*,” Verlaine announced before Anthony Lunetta could even begin to question what was taking place. “Got him on four counts of arson.”

“Don’t believe a fuckin’...” Manny started to gripe, only to have Kenny Clarke open the back door of the Dodge, then shove him inside.

Anthony Lunetta studied Verlaine for a moment, each of them fully aware of a shared history noticeably lacking in warm, fuzzy, or nostalgic moments, then shrugged. “You look like shit,” said Lunetta with what seemed like a surprising tinge of sadness from someone known to be a *Jefe* which meant that he could, with no more than a word or gesture, instantly mobilize virtually the entire neighborhood, not to mention a significant portion of the population in the California penal system.

“Nice to see you, too,” Verlaine replied dryly before climbing in behind the wheel of the Dodge.

As the unmarked car, heading westbound, retraced the same route as before, leaving Boyle Heights and taking the 1st Street Bridge, then turning south onto Alameda, Manny Lunetta, who was 200 tattooed pounds of rising star with steroid-induced muscles in what was known locally as *La eMe*, but to others as the Mexican Mafia, finally broke the extended silence that had engulfed them since leaving La Serenata.

“This is fuckin’ horseshit!” Manny grumbled, addressing no one in particular.

“You hear something?” Kenny Clarke asked his partner.

“Must be the wind,” Verlaine replied.

“Mothafuckas ain’t got dick on me!” Manny howled.

“Tell him, Kenny,” Verlaine said to Clarke wearily.

“Tell me what?”

“Your friend gave you up,” Kenny Clarke answered.

“What friend?”

“Ronnie.”

“Ronnie who?”

“Ronnie who’s waiting for you,” Kenny Clarke responded.

“W-waiting where?” Manny mumbled.

“Somebody sound nervous?” Verlaine asked.

To Kenny Clarke’s dismay, Verlaine reached over and opened the glove compartment, then pulled out a small bottle of Tequila, starting yet another chapter in what had become a daily drama in their shared life on the police force.

“Hey...” Kenny Clarke protested.

“First of the day,” Verlaine stated.

“C’mon...” responded Kenny Clarke unhappily.

“Okay,” Verlaine countered with a shrug. “First since lunch.”

“Mikey...” Kenny Clarke found himself saying sadly, still not buying into Verlaine’s line.

“What’re you, my conscience?” Verlaine murmured, ignoring his partner’s words of caution by opening the bottle. Not wanting to escalate matters in front of Manny Lunetta, Kenny Clarke reluctantly restrained himself, then watched as Verlaine took what appeared to be a much-needed hit.

The sun was slowly starting to disappear in the western sky that had been to their right as the Dodge swung east off Alameda, then wound its way toward a realm of warehouses and factories that had clearly seen better days.

The zone they entered was not yet graced with the gentrification that is almost invariably initiated by cash-poor artists in need of affordable space, only to reach its apotheosis, financially, but not creatively, with the stockbrokers, investment bankers, designers, galleries, brasseries, and sons and daughters of the gilded who follow once the pioneers have made an area first relatively livable, then trendy and chic. Though generally fairly quiet during daylight hours, it was almost entirely abandoned now that evening was nearing. Avoiding a rat the size of a small cocker spaniel, the Dodge made one more in a series of turns, then passed a rubble-strewn lot before screeching to a halt in front of a no-longer-operative factory.

Verlaine and Clarke hopped out of their car, then pulled an unhappy Manny Lunetta out from the back seat.

“I-I don’t want to be here,” Manny grumbled.

“Do me a favor,” Verlaine asked Kenny Clarke.

“What’s that?”

“Tell this sack of shit nobody cares.”

Having been through situations of this sort far too many times before, Kenny Clarke gave a half-hearted chuckle, then shoved Manny forcefully.

Moving ever so slowly, and in truth only because Kenny Clarke was now using the barrel of his gun, rather than his bare hand, to smack him periodically in the small of the back, Manny Lunetta begrudgingly huffed and puffed his way up the factory’s dilapidated stairs.

“I’m telling you,” Manny said with some difficulty after a couple of minutes, “I never

heard of Ronnie-whatever-the-fuck-his-name-is.”

Verlaine made no attempt to hide his feelings.

“Believe this fucking guy?” he asked Kenny Clarke cynically as the three of them continued their ascent, with Manny Lunetta sweating less from exertion than from an ever-mounting dose of fear.

“And you’ve never been busted for arson,” Kenny Clarke chimed in.

“Or pimping.”

“Or dealing.”

Frowning, Manny Lunetta did not respond.

“But you surprised me, Manny. I didn’t expect to find you in this part of town. With you I figure turf like East L.A., Bell, Pico Rivera, Whittier...”

Many still said nothing as his heavy breathing increased.

Up the three of them went, and went, and went, with Kenny Clarke prodding Manny with greater and greater frequency so as to counteract both the thug’s exhaustion and his red-lining sense of dread. By the time the three sweaty specimens reached the top floor of the building, where they came upon a hallway lined with offices, Manny’s early bravado had completely given way to asthmatic rasping, plus an uncontrollable quivering that made him look like a deflated Pendleton shirt with a terminal case of Parkinson’s.

Surprisingly vigorous, as though the extended, arduous climb, and the perspiration that was an inevitable by-product due to the heat, had burned off not just the traces of alcohol, but also two decades or so from his forty-some-odd years, Verlaine led the way to their destination: an office with a badly peeling door that had been shattered near the top by an ax that still protruded from it.

Verlaine kicked open the door – or at least what was left of it – then Kenny Clarke

shoved Manny into an unfurnished room where a paunchy guy known to the world as Ronnie Willens sat uncomfortably on the floor, handcuffed to an exposed pipe.

“Manny!” Willens, who was dressed in the warm-up suit, running shoes, and gold chains that seemed *de rigueur* for local white racketeers, implored at the sight of the new arrival. “Tell ‘em for Chrissake! Give ‘em what they need so I can get the fuck out of here!”

Manny took a moment so as to stop breathing like a broken-down gasoline-powered lawnmower, then shook his head disdainfully.

“Never saw this fuckin’ guy,” Manny announced softly but dyspeptically to the two detectives.

“Fuck you!” screamed Willens, who had all the finesse an ex-junkie could be expected to have. “Cut the shit, you stupid fuckin’ ass wipe!”

Manny sneered dismissively at Willens. Then, with a surprising degree of regained composure, he turned to Verlaine and Clarke.

“I want my lawyer!” he snarled, his indignation mounting.

“He wants his lawyer,” Verlaine said to Clarke.

“I got a right to a fuckin’ lawyer!” Manny insisted.

“You got a right to dick!” Clarke informed him in no uncertain terms, slamming Manny down to the floor, then adjusting his handcuffs so that Manny Lunetta, like Ronnie Willens, was now attached to a length of exposed pipe.

Manny responded by flailing his arms and legs, then going into a silent fume. But that attempt at solipsism came to an abrupt end when Willens, whose trepidation seemed to be increasing with each passing second, slapped his co-conspirator on the arm.

“H-how much time we got?” Willens asked softly.

“Fuck you!” Manny bellowed.

Kenny Clarke allowed Manny a moment to simmer, then approached him and knelt

down so as to get into his face.

“Your buddy Ronnie says you used a two-hour delayed fuse,” Clarke began, enunciating each word carefully. “Since we clocked you leaving here must’ve been an hour-and-a-half ago...”

“More than that,” Verlaine interjected.

“That gives us ten... maybe fifteen minutes tops.”

“Want to know my feeling?” Verlaine asked. “My feeling is fuck ‘em!”

“Fuck ‘em is right,” Clarke agreed, getting to his feet, then starting toward the shattered door. “I’m think I’m gonna wait in the car. In fact, I know I’m gonna wait in the car.”

Verlaine watched Kenny Clarke leave the room. Then, as they had played it so many times before, it was his turn to go over and kneel beside Manny.

“Since you’re only the hired help,” Verlaine said softly to Manny, “tell me something. Is it worth going up in smoke for whoever-in-hell brokered this fucking deal?”

“Suck my dick!” Manny spat.

“Not likely,” Verlaine stated flatly. “Not me, not your girlfriend, and not anybody else in the little that’s left of your fucked-up pathetic life.” With a sigh of resignation, Verlaine stood up straight, then took a step toward the door.

“You ain’t leavin’, are you?” quivered a fear-riddled Willens.

“Think I’m stupid enough to sit here and wait for the building to go up in flames?”

“B-but what about us?” Willens barely managed to articulate.

A half-smile appeared on Verlaine’s face. “Know what they call two char-broiled scumbags” he asked.

“W-what?”

“A start,” Verlaine answered with the grimmest of chuckles.

Seeing Verlaine about to disappear through the shattered doorway as Kenny Clarke did

before him, Willens began sobbing like a baby.

“Please!” Willens screamed at Verlaine. “I beg you! Don’t just fuckin’ leave us!”

“Shut the fuck up!” shouted Manny, smacking Willens with his free hand.

“Fuck you, you fuckin’ douche bag of a moron!” Willens shouted back, kicking Manny in the shin. “Maybe you want your ass to burn, but not me!”

As Verlaine, to Willens’ dismay, stepped from the office out into the hallway, Manny grabbed his fellow captive by the throat.

“Relax, goddamnit!” Manny said.

“How the fuck am I supposed to relax?”

“He’s a fuckin’ cop. He can’t just let us burn.”

“Crazy as that motherfucker is?” Willens asked.

Though hardly given to reflection, Willens’ question nonetheless caused Manny to ponder.

“R-really think he’d do it?” Manny asked.

As if in answer to the question, at that very moment the two of them heard the first of what they knew was certain to be a series of man-made explosions rock the building.

“H-holy shit!” Willens screamed, sensing more than ever his imminent demise.

“Shut the fuck up!”

“Fuck you *and* your mother!” was Willen’s response. “You know as well as I do the fuckin’ building’s gonna go up in flames!”

Manny Lunetta squirmed for a moment, as though torn between an innate desire for self-preservation and a longstanding belief in an unspoken code. Then, his entire being finally starting to yield to the abject fear that had been mounting inside of him since the very first moment the detectives dragged him to the factory, he began to scream.

“It was Peretta!” Manny bellowed in the direction of the doorway. “Vince-fuckin’-

Peretta!”

A moment passed, then into the office stepped Verlaine.

“And who else?”

“What if I give you names, and you just fuckin’ leave us here?” Manny whimpered.

“Anything’s possible,” Verlaine responded with a shrug.

“Tell him, you dumb piece of shit!” Willens begged. “Tell him quick!”

Manny assessed his plight, then seemed to break right in front of Verlaine’s eye’s. “Carl Miner and Pete McKeller,” Manny whispered sadly as another explosion rocked the building.

Willens, by that point both desperate and emboldened, once more kicked Manny in the shins.

“How many fuckin’ fuses did you set, you big fuckin’ idiot?” Willens demanded.

“Too fuckin’ many,” answered Manny, by then a shadow of his former self.

With their sirens screaming and their red lights flashing, fire engines and police cars were racing up toward the flame-engulfed building as down the fire escape came Verlaine, together with still-handcuffed Manny Lunetta and Ronnie Willens. Their hearts pounding, their faces covered with soot, the three of them jumped down to the ground, where Manny and Willens crumpled momentarily before being taken into custody by uniformed cops who had arrived at the crime scene. Verlaine, meanwhile, his adrenaline-rush giving way to exhaustion, trudged slowly away from the flames toward the spot where Kenny Clarke was standing.

“For a minute there,” Clarke said with a shrug, “I wasn’t too sure.”

“Only a minute?” Verlaine asked without the slightest trace of irony as his partner suddenly watched him start to look and feel significantly sadder and wearier, as well as considerably older than his years.

San Pedro, which despite its Spanish name has long been pronounced, even by Latinos, as San *Pee-drow*, and generally referred to by locals simply as *Pedro*, has long been an anomaly among Southern California beach towns for having ocean-view real estate prices that never soared into the stratosphere. Originally a fishing village that attracted a curious collection of Europeans accustomed to earning their living from the sea – Greeks, Croatians, Italians, and Portuguese – it grew first into a maritime-based town, then, thanks to its ever-increasing importance as a port, a fairly prosperous city of beaches, hills, churches, and a justly celebrated lighthouse.

Even after being annexed into the ever-burgeoning city of Los Angeles, *Pedro* retained its own identity as a place where sport fishing commingled with growing commercial tuna fleets, and where family life coexisted with the bars, bail bondsmen, pawn shops, and transient hotels catering to the rapidly mounting numbers of merchant seamen passing through what was fast becoming the West's principal port.

It was only with the creation of oil refineries that the seaside town's future became both grimmer and grimmer. Though the refineries brought jobs and revenue -- plus lights that created a night-time glow that could be considered beautiful or wonderfully otherworldly by those with either a futuristic or a surrealist bent, or alternatively a penchant for smoking weed -- the accompanying rise in chemical-laden pollution, and the concern that kids growing up breathing such air would inevitably turn into human nightlights, put an artificially low but fully comprehensible ceiling on the prices of both grand houses and cute little hillside cottages.

But it was not past either the grand houses or the picturesque hillside cottages that an eighteen-year-old with more than his share of rage and resentment walked early that evening. Rather, it was down a street of cheesy-looking apartments in need of gentrification, or better yet, urban renewal. With long hair, a gold earring, a couple of tattoos, and a Band-Aid across his left cheek, plus the kind of world-weariness affected so perfectly by each and every

generation of alienated hipsters, the eighteen-year-old, whose name was Danny, approached a three-story stucco apartment building, then pulled out a key and unlocked the front door.

A couple of minutes later, Danny let himself into a spartanly furnished third-floor apartment that was noticeably lacking in paintings, photos, or any other evidence of warmth or domesticity.

Hearing the sound of a shower running, Danny headed toward the bathroom. There, he opened the door at the very moment that out from the shower stepped not merely Verlaine, but also a twenty-three-year-old girl who, shortly after her arrival in California, had dropped her lengthy and difficult to pronounce Korean name and instead, after breast-enhancement surgery, had embraced the American name Ruby as well as a specialized line of work.

Letting out a shriek, the newly well-endowed Ruby quickly wrapped a towel around her not entirely private parts, then pushed her way past Danny, while Verlaine was putting a towel around his waist.

“300 bucks outcall from Craigslist?” asked Danny with more than a trace of bitterness mixed in with his barb. “Or is she gonna be my new stepmother?”

“You’re supposed to knock,” Verlaine answered tersely.

“I need a ride,” said the eighteen-year-old personification of attitude.

Instead of addressing Danny’s demand, Verlaine gestured toward the Band-Aid on his son’s cheek. “What happened?”

“Nothin’,” Danny responded sourly. “I’ve got a gig, and my fuckin’ heap won’t start.”

“Watch your fuckin’ language,” Verlaine said in a half-hearted attempt at humor as he heard the Korean girl throwing on her clothes in the bedroom. “Where’s your mother?”

“How the fuck should I know?”

“And that drummer of yours?”

“Lent his car to his brother,” Danny answered with a shrug. “And in case you’re wondering, I tried Uncle Joe, but he’s not at the bar.”

The Korean girl interrupted the two men momentarily by sticking her head into the bathroom.

“Bye,” she said to Verlaine after sneaking a peek at Danny, who surprised her with a faint smile that elicited an even brighter grin from her.

His anger having waned momentarily during the silent exchange with the girl known as Ruby, Danny watched her leave, then once again faced his father.

“Forget it,” Danny said with a vulnerability that surprised both him and Verlaine. “Now you know why I never ask for shit.”

A half hour later, out from a blue cottage on a San Pedro hillside came two young guys lugging a drum set: Danny and a skinhead with a ring in his nose who went simply by RJ.

As they opened the rear door of a Cherokee that could have benefited greatly from a visit to Earl Scheib’s, RJ could not resist a dig at Verlaine, who was seated unhappily behind the wheel.

“Check this action,” RJ said as though to no one in particular. “A police escort.”

Verlaine said nothing, focusing instead on the Slim Harpo CD he was listening to until at last RJ climbed in beside the drum set, while Danny got into the passenger seat in front.

“So,” RJ said as Verlaine hit the gas pedal to get their journey underway, “any body count today? Any murder or mayhem?”

Accustomed to this kind of banter from his son’s friends, Verlaine shrugged. “Day’s not over yet.”

Without a word, Danny bent forward so as to switch from the CD player to FM radio, then fiddled with the dial until he found the indie station he was looking for. But a moment

later, also without a word, Verlaine hit the console again, and on came Slim Harpo singing, “Baby, Scratch My Back.”

“What’s with you?” Danny said bitterly.

“You can always walk,” was Verlaine’s response.

The trip north on the Harbor Freeway, then east on the 10 was a tension-filled war of wills, with Danny feeling that he was being shown up in front of his band mate by his father, despite the fact that RJ spent much of the voyage tapping his hands in tune first with Slim Harpo, then with the likes of Ernie K-Doe and Jesse Hill when Verlaine switched to an often-played compilation of New Orleans R&B. Making matters worse for Danny, RJ appeared stunned to discover – and eager to discuss with Verlaine in great detail – the fact that it was Benny Spellman, not the Stones, who did the original of “Fortune Teller,” and that it was Irma Thomas, not Mick Jagger, who sang the first version of “Time Is On My Side.” The result of all the back-and-forth about musical history, and specifically the link between Rhythm & Blues and Rock & Roll, during which the usually monosyllabic Verlaine spoke with greater animation and knowledge than either young musician could have anticipated, was that by the time they swung off the Freeway at Alameda, then headed north toward Traction, Danny was thoroughly pissed off not just at his father, but at both of them.

Danny was still seething, in fact, when the Cherokee turned east into an area where warehouses and factories had given way to artists’ lofts, then swung a right onto a quiet block, followed by another right onto a street where rock music was blaring.

It was a warehouse that had been converted into a music emporium called The Loft that was the source both of the music and of the large crowd of people in their late teens and twenties, some of whom were milling about while others waited on line in the hope of getting inside.

Careful to avoid the stoners and drinkers who were wobbling in and out of the street, Verlaine steered the Cherokee up toward the entrance, then pulled over near the curb.

While RJ jumped out of the back seat and started wrestling with the drum set, Danny, still irritated, turned to face his father.

“I’ll get somebody to drive me to Mom’s,” Danny said tersely.

“Long as I’m here, I might as well grab a drink.”

“A drink?” Danny asked, making little effort to hide his sneer.

“What’re you?” Verlaine shot back. “My conscience?”

Danny was about to go full force at his father when RJ suddenly pounded on the roof of the car.

“Gimme a hand, for Chrissake!” RJ shouted.

The people waiting on line – a strange assortment of art students, punks, Goths, Westsiders, and even some Valley types – watched with a mixture of curiosity and jealousy as Danny, toting his guitar, used his free hand to help RJ with the drum set as they made their way toward the beefy bouncer named Jumbo who was guarding the door.

“What’s up, dude?” Jumbo, who looked like he lived on a diet of raw meat and lemons, asked Danny in an uncharacteristically friendly way.

“Hangin’ in there,” Danny replied.

Together with RJ and the drum set, plus, to his chagrin, an ever so incongruous Mike Verlaine, Danny headed dutifully into the club.

Entering The Loft in the wake of Danny and RJ, Verlaine could not help but be struck both by the decibel level and by the sight of a vast dance floor filled with people, few of them more than half his age, gyrating under strobe lights.

Almost immediately a huge security guy who went by the name Cassidy stormed toward

Danny and RJ.

“Where the fuck you been?” Cassidy demanded angrily. “You’re on in fifteen fucking minutes?”

“Chill,” RJ said coolly.

“What do you mean, *chill*?”

“We’re here, aren’t we?” RJ shot back with as much nonchalance as he could muster.

Danny was about to head off with RJ to join their band mates when suddenly, almost beseechingly, he turned to his father.

“Don’t embarrass me,” he said to Verlaine.

“Me?” Verlaine replied as innocently as possible.

Danny started to say something, then thought better of it. He gave his father one last pleading look, then set off with RJ toward where their two other band members were waiting.

Verlaine watched the four of them disappear backstage, then turned for a better look at a world that seemed as alien to him as another galaxy. Watching the flora and fauna of The Loft was for him, though he would never have described it as such, equal parts sociology and anthropology, with a heavy dose of curiosity plus more than a measure of adventure thrown in. It was akin in certain ways to the scene he remembered from his own youth – a period, that like his youth itself, came to an abrupt and premature end, much to his chagrin – yet in other ways it was dramatically, even radically, different.

So intrigued was Verlaine that there’s no telling how long he might have stood and gazed at the goings-on had a surprisingly familiar voice not interrupted his gaping.

“If you’re looking for me, I’m innocent,” was what Verlaine heard, and he turned to see a heavy-set guy whose hair had thinned since their last encounter, and who had taken to sporting a graying ponytail.

“Innocent of what?” Verlaine asked the man, whose name he knew to be Happy Dunbar.

“There’s gotta be something,” Dunbar responded with a shrug. “What gives?”

“Maybe I just wanted to hear some good music,” Verlaine replied.

“Then you’re in the wrong fuckin’ place,” Dunbar said with a bitter laugh.

“My kid’s in the band,” Verlaine commented.

“No shit?” Dunbar asked with more surprise than embarrassment.

“No shit.”

“That’s funny,” Dunbar said. “Your kid’s working for me, and *schmucko* that I am, I didn’t have a clue.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time.”

“That’s what I love about you,” Dunbar cracked. “These kids,” he went on as a kind of explanation. “I pay ‘em cash, and most of ‘em use stage names anyway. *Handles*, they call ‘em. Slash. Stud. Nowhere. Dash. Just like the taggers, I guess. Hey, long as you’re here, want to do me a favor?”

“Nope,” said Verlaine.

“That’s what friends are for, huh? I’m serious. I want to hear what you think of the goddamn security system.”

As Verlaine allowed himself to be enlisted by Dunbar, out in the street more and more people continued to arrive at the club in the hope of being allowed in. Among them were a couple of Westside cuties with t-shirts that barely reached their navels, along with rings galore, necklaces, and expensively tattered jeans. Using their wiles and as much guile as possible, the two girls – known to their friends back home as Susie Rogers and Margo Klein, though on the club scene they would never admit to what they considered to be unremarkable and therefore somewhat embarrassing last names, or to the fact that they were still in high school, and in honors classes no less – made their way through the crowd toward the entrance, where they

smiled flirtatiously at Jumbo, the keeper of the door.

“Lookin’ cute, Jumbo,” said Susie Rogers coquettishly.

“I got your cute,” barked Jumbo, feigning indifference initially, then, in what obviously was some kind of ritual between them, accepting pecks on the cheek as well as hugs from both girls, whom he then permitted to enter.

Then up toward him stepped a couple of tattooed characters who went by Torres and Shields.

“Let’s see some ID’s, guys,” Jumbo said to them.

“Don’t I look twenty-one?” Torres asked.

“I looked twenty-one when I was fifteen-fuckin’-years old,” Jumbo replied.

Torres and Shields begrudgingly flashed drivers’ licenses, which in truth Jumbo, having already, in his own way, shown who was boss, barely took the time or effort to scrutinize.

Happy Dunbar, who shed the first name Marvin as soon as his high school days in New Jersey were over, was a guy who initially got his foot into the door of the music business by running errands, then rapidly became a friend to the great and the near-great by becoming what was termed a *provider*. Goods and services were what he provided, whether that meant a Rolex that fell off a truck, a private eye who would come through with a less-than-legal wiretap, an introduction to a new girl in town, or even a helping of nose candy. Cunning, irrepressible, and vigorously upwardly mobile -- and above all never the least bit self-conscious about either his behavior or his activities -- Dunbar parlayed his gift of gab and his ever-growing list of contacts into a stint with a music biz management company. There, swiftly, he acquired a buzz as someone with a great nose for talent -- someone who could spot, then sign and steer toward stardom, what people then were calling the *Next Big Thing*. But since with rare exceptions the music business is not long on patience, when Dunbar’s *next Otis Redding*, and his *next Joni*

Mitchell, and his *next Springsteen*, and even his *next NWA* all made the journey from *prospect* to *suspect* to *reject* in record time, it was expected in some quarters that Happy Dunbar would have to find another line of work, or else do something drastic like joining the Hari Krishnas. Instead, Dunbar fell upwards once again, getting a shot as the head of a boutique record label where, by foregoing conventional wisdom and having the audacity, or temerity, or as some would put it the *cojones* to follow his own nose, he commissioned then released a series of unexpected and under-publicized albums that, based on their distinctiveness, managed to become minor hits. Had the albums been what were known as *one-offs*, that is to say random or unrelated events, it's likely almost to the point of a certainty that nothing remarkable or substantial would have resulted or ensued. But given that it was a case of more than a few modest successes – and that they hit the stores, and several years' *10 Best Lists*, one after another after another -- cumulatively their sales made a lot of noise for the label, as well as a significant amount of cash. Where no one else would consider financing a spoken word album by hard-drinking poet Charles Bukowski, Dunbar produced not one, but three, all of which sold surprisingly well locally, and even better in unexpected markets such as Japan and France. Where no one else had any interest in a bunch of white Texas kids playing the blues, Dunbar again allowed a band to put together a body of work, then did the same for acts as dissimilar as Michael Bloomfield, the Chambers Brothers, and too-black-for-mainstream Chicago guitar whiz Magic Sam. In no time the label – now perceived by insiders to be *his* label -- came to be seen as a haven of sorts, an artist-friendly anomaly that was a darling to musicians, to music-lovers, and even to hard-to-please music critics, and that brought what music types called *label loyalty* both to stores and to the world of clubs and concert halls.

But the same nose that was his meal ticket with talent proved to be Dunbar's downfall in another way. With ever-increasing revenue, plus his first real taste of personal glory, Happy Dunbar, instead of providing coke to others as he once did, took to indulging in it himself. And

indulging. And indulging. And with the indulgence came arrogance. And with the arrogance came sloppiness. And with the sloppiness came a bust. Though he was never actually convicted, word quickly went out that Dunbar had made a deal by once again becoming a provider. But this time, the rumor went, it was information that he was providing. And this time, it was said, the beneficiaries were the cops.

It was during the same period of time that Happy Dunbar, by then no longer the personification of his nickname, became a sad and bitter pariah in the music biz. And it was also during that period of time that he and Detective Mike Verlaine began whatever shared history there was between them.

Because of that history, Verlaine allowed himself to be led by Dunbar into The Loft's Surveillance Room, a small, dark, inconspicuous space where a bruiser named Gillespie sat in front of a console with five TV monitors, plus an array of levers and gadgets.

"You guys know each other, right?" asked Dunbar.

Gillespie and Verlaine exchanged the kind of wary looks that made it clear there were no fond memories being shared, each of them far too conscious of the run-ins between them that had taken place before a gunshot wound in the leg ended what Gillespie sometimes referred to as his *wild days*.

"Our paths have crossed," Verlaine said softly, letting Gillespie off easily and thereby allowing the ex-con to retain some semblance of dignity.

Verlaine then turned his attention to the monitors, and what they did or did not show. The first one, he found, covered the building's front entrance. The second covered the men's room, not due to kinkiness or voyeurism, but instead because in clubs like The Loft such a spot was invariably the principal venue for drug sales and consumption. The third camera, despite what in a court of law would be considered both illegal and immoral, covered the ladies room, while the fourth covered roughly half of the dance floor. But the fifth camera, which seemed to

be malfunctioning, covered absolutely nothing at all.

“What’s with the dead one?” Verlaine asked, motioning toward the blank monitor.

“Been that way for a while,” Gillespie muttered.

“So get it fixed.”

Hearing Verlaine’s words, Gillespie turned to Dunbar. “What’ve I been saying?”

“Okay, already,” Dunbar answered with little cheer. “I get it.”

“Don’t know if you’re worried about dealing,” Verlaine said. “Or fights. Or…”

“All of the above,” Gillespie said unhappily.

“You name it, we got it,” Dunbar concurred, “though the biggest crime around here is probably what passes for music.”

“With that dead monitor, the whole set-up’s basically a stroke. And if there’s something you’re afraid of…” Verlaine said.

“What in hell’s that mean?” Dunbar interjected, perhaps a little too defensively for Verlaine’s taste.

“You’re the one who dragged me in here.”

“Not really,” Dunbar said with a sigh, referring to surveillance, rather than to the fact that he did indeed drag Verlaine in.

“Not really yes? Or not really no?”

“In this world? Who the fuck knows!” Dunbar grumbled, as though acknowledging the frustration not just of his own existence, but of life itself. “C’mon, I’ll buy us both a drink.”

After carefully avoiding talk of old times while downing a shot of Tequila with Dunbar, Verlaine gave serious thought to calling it a night and heading home, then changed his mind and found a spot at the bar that afforded him about as decent a view as possible in a place that had not been designed to maximize sight lines.

Ordering another Tequila and a Dos Equis, Verlaine watched as Danny, RJ and their band mates came on-stage and instantly won over the crowd. It had always been Verlaine's contention that audiences arrive wanting to like what they've paid to see, whether the form of entertainment is music, comedy, dance, or even something more arcane like magic. But that initial goodwill is reinforced, according to his line of reasoning, or alternatively irrevocably lost, in the opening moments of performance. If the band, or comic, or dancer, or magician seems to care about the gig, the audience's hopes are validated, which makes the evening a success for all. But if the artist, or artists, have the audacity to come off seeming disinterested, disdainful, or disgusted, then there's almost certainly hell to pay.

Verlaine was not sure about the music Danny and the others were playing. In fact, though thinking so brought back unpleasant memories of his own father's views towards the blues and R&B he embraced while growing up, and continued to love, he wasn't sure that what he was hearing at The Loft could even be considered music at all, or at least not music as he knew it and liked it. But there was no question that their hearts seemed to be in it, and so too were their souls. Nor was there any doubt whatsoever about Danny's charisma. All the attitude, all the barely concealed resentment and rage that made dealing with him in real life so difficult for Verlaine, seemed to find an outlet through his guitar-playing, his vocals, and above all his stage presence. The result was an edge that was piercing, plus a larger-than-life quality that Verlaine could observe in full force as it sent shivers through the females in attendance.

Not merely watching his son, but more importantly watching *scores of others* watch his son, Verlaine was surprised, and indeed pleased, by how much pride was surging forth from deep within him. As though toasting this much-appreciated revelation, Verlaine tossed back the Tequila and the beer, then motioned toward a bartender who sported a shaved head and pirate earrings for another round.

"You into this shit?" the bartender asked with a quizzical look on his face.

“Guitar player’s my kid,” Verlaine answered.

As the bartender, with a shrug, refilled the Tequila, then opened another bottle of beer, the cop in Verlaine, which in this case meant the restless part of him that was given to casing any joint he stumbled into, whether on-duty or off-, thought he spotted something through the corner of his eye.

On second look it was Cassidy, the security guy, who caught Verlaine’s attention when, near the dance floor, he suddenly stiffened. And the reason for his stiffening, Verlaine quickly deduced, was that someone had approached him from the rear and jammed something against his rib cage. That someone, though Verlaine was not familiar with him yet, and certainly did not know his name, was the tattooed guy who was known as Torres.

Cursing silently, Verlaine watched Cassidy allow himself to be steered toward the door leading to The Loft’s offices. Then, carefully, Verlaine scanned the rest of the club and took note of someone else headed for trouble: Torres’ buddy Shields, who with his gun inconspicuous but nonetheless visible in his right hand, was approaching the door to the Surveillance Room.

Oblivious to all that was going on, the bartender turned to see if Verlaine wanted yet another round, then was surprised to find that his erstwhile customer was already on the move.

Inside the Surveillance Room, Gillespie was going through papers and occasionally peering up at the monitors, when in mid-glance he heard an unfamiliar voice.

“See anything you like?” asked someone he could not remember hearing before.

Turning to see the intruder, Gillespie barely caught a glimpse of Shields’ face before he was pistol-whipped into unconsciousness.

Locked in his office behind a massive, antique door, Happy Dunbar was looking out

onto the dance floor through a one-way see-through door when he heard a knock, then hit an intercom button.

“Talk,” Dunbar said, getting right to the point.

“It’s me, boss,” Dunbar heard Cassidy reply, so he buzzed the door open, only to be stunned when Cassidy tumbled in, followed by Torres, who waved a gun.

“Open the fuckin’ safe!” Torres commanded.

With no great ease, Verlaine was at that very moment doing his best to weave his way through the gyrating bodies on the dance floor, not one of whom understood, or to Verlaine’s way of seeing it, gave a shit, about the sense of urgency he felt.

But then, none of the dancers had a clue, nor in truth were any of them likely to care, that in his private office Happy Dunbar was just then being forced to open the door to a wall safe, then yanking out two large piles of greenbacks, which he held out toward Torres, who to his surprise knocked the money away.

“You know what I fuckin’ want!” Torres snarled.

Suddenly, Cassidy tried to save the day by lunging at Torres. But that attempt at heroism went instantly awry when Torres stopped him in his tracks with two deadly shots to the chest.

“Hustle, fuckface!” Torres screamed at Dunbar, “Or you’re next!”

Elsewhere in The Loft, Shields came striding out of the Surveillance Room, only to crumple to the floor when Verlaine cold-cocked him with the butt of his pistol! Wasting no time with small talk, Verlaine moved on instantly.

Still under the watchful eye of Torres, Happy Dunbar extracted a large metal box from

the wall safe, which drew an icy smile from the gunman.

“Put it on the desk, then open it nice and slow,” Torres ordered.

Dunbar turned toward the desk as told, then suddenly whirled, heaving the box at Torres with all his might!

Torres’ gun blasted wide of the mark as the heavy metal box nailed him in the face! Dunbar chose that exact moment to hurl himself at Torres with such force that the two of them crashed right through the one-way see-through window!

In the Surveillance Room, meanwhile, though bloodied and beaten from the pistol-whipping, Gillespie staggered to his feet and glanced at the monitors as Dunbar and Torres fell through the shattered glass onto the dance floor!

Watching the dance floor monitor as Torres broke free and blasted two shots into Dunbar, Gillespie pushed a button that killed the dance floor strobe lights, then hit another button that instead turned on bright white spotlights!

Between the murderous gunfire, the resulting screams, and the blinding glare of the bright white spotlights, it was not the least bit surprising that panic immediately reigned on the dance floor.

And no one, it seemed, was more frightened than Torres, whose well-made plans for what he expected to be a quick and easy job had gone completely up in smoke.

Making his predicament even worse, in glancing around in search of a way out, Torres spotted Verlaine, who was approaching with his gun drawn.

Wanting somehow, some way, to extricate himself from the bloody mess he’d gotten himself into, Torres fired one shot, then another – missing Verlaine, but blasting first one sap who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, then a second! Even more panicked

than before, Torres then tried to run across the dance floor as terrified onlookers parted like the Red Sea.

With Verlaine in pursuit, Torres jumped onto the stage, then got the shock of his life when Danny, the guitar hero, smacked him across the back with his axe!

Though Torres stumbled, he rallied his forces with animal-like fury, grabbing Danny by the throat, then jamming his gun against the guitar-player's temple.

Emboldened by having a hostage, Torres turned to face Verlaine.

“Drop the gun, or he's a dead man!” Torres bellowed.

Stymied, Verlaine was about to comply when, seemingly out from nowhere, burst two plainclothes cops with guns drawn: a good-looking, blue-eyed All-American sort named Bob Benton, and his gym rat sidekick John Bishop.

With what Verlaine took to be uncalled for recklessness, Benton fired a shot that somehow managed to nail Torres in the shoulder, allowing Danny to break free!

Blinded by pain, Torres fired into the crowd like a crazy man, engendering shrieks and screams as well as sending people diving for what they hoped would be safety. The shots also elicited further gunfire from Bishop and Benton, and from Verlaine as well, upping the pandemonium to record levels until Verlaine, who prided himself on his marksmanship, suddenly stopped Torres with a bullet to the heart.

In the eerie silence that ensued, Verlaine ran right over to Danny, who was understandably shaking with fear.

“It's over now,” Verlaine said softly in an attempt to calm his son.

“For him, maybe,” Benton said while approaching. “But not for you.”

Verlaine turned toward Benton and Bishop with undisguised rage.

“What the fuck does that mean?” Verlaine demanded.

“Tell him, John.”

“Tell him what?”

“Firing among all those civilians,” Benton stated after casting an angry look at his partner.

“Don’t give me that shit!” Verlaine said. “You’re the one who fired first.”

“Not the way I saw it,” countered Benton with a patrician arrogance that brought out the worst in Verlaine. “John?”

“You fucked up, Mike,” Bishop affirmed, having caught on at last.

As uniformed cops poured onto the dance floor in an attempt to restore some semblance of order, Verlaine glanced first at Benton, then at Bishop, then snapped.

“Sonofabitch!” Verlaine yelled, decking Benton with a right to the jaw, then leaping onto him – only to be pulled off by Bishop and some uniformed cops.

Climbing to his feet, his mouth bloody and aching, Benton studied Verlaine momentarily, then sneered.

“See you at the fucking hearing!” is all Benton said.

Under ordinary circumstances, an administrative hearing is rarely scheduled with anything resembling alacrity. But due to the high profile nature of the events that took place at The Loft, and the importance within the LA community of certain people whose kids were witness to the killing -- plus, Verlaine suspected, his own position within the Police Department, which was tenuous even in the best of times -- it was only a few days later that Verlaine was summoned to Parker Center.

Unable to eat or to sleep since the incident, incapable of sitting still in a movie theater or in front of a TV, indeed no good for doing much of anything except pacing, and listening to much-used CDs by Solomon Burke, the Chambers Brothers, Big Maybelle, and the Soul Stirrers, Verlaine was hardly a portrait of fitness – mental, physical, or emotional – when,

together with his attorney, he was ushered into a conference room.

Ray Salinas, who was serving as Verlaine's counsel, was quintessentially LA. Raised by a single mom who crossed the border illegally near Calexico, he had been a gang member before joining the Army, then while working his way through LA City College and UCLA had become active in La Raza. Instead of trying to tear down the system, he changed directions once he got married and held two jobs so as to put himself through Southwestern Law School at night, then served as a Public Defender before going into private practice. So while his CV did not glisten with lustrous names like Yale, Harvard or Stanford, Salinas knew his way around local politics – and the way things *really* worked -- better than most, which made it clear to him that Mike Verlaine was not in for an easy time.

The preliminaries were brief. While Verlaine stood off to the side, Salinas shook hands with Police Chief Carl Hawkins and Assistant Chief Lou Ortiz, then eyed Bob Benton and John Bishop, both dressed in what appeared to be Brooks Brothers suits and ties, without a smile, a nod, or so much as a greeting.

With no further ado, the conference room shades were drawn and the lights extinguished, then a TV was flicked on by remote control. Fuzz and static filled the screen momentarily, then on came some grainy footage.

“Here's the surveillance tape,” Lou Ortiz announced to one and all, and instantly Verlaine went into outrage mode.

“This is bullshit!” Verlaine muttered.

“That's enough, Mike!” Chief Hawkins shot back, glaring at Verlaine, who was not the least bit chastened.

While Ray Salinas did his best to calm and restrain his client, more fuzz and static came onto the TV screen, then that gave way to a wide angle shot of The Loft's dance floor, taken from a surveillance camera above. People were dancing, and everything seemed to be normal –

until, that is, Torres and Dunbar could be seen crashing through the one-way see-through window!

“The club owner and the perp,” Lou Ortiz explained to all those assembled, as though doing a play-by-play.

On the TV screen Torres could next be seen pumping two bullets into Dunbar, then spotting someone who was conspicuously off-camera – presumably Verlaine – and responding by firing again and again, nailing two different young people in the crowd.

A moment later, Torres could be viewed racing across the dance floor, then leaping onto the stage, where he disappeared momentarily from view.

“What’s going on?” asked Chief Hawkins.

“Just one second...” said Lou Ortiz.

Sure enough, Torres, having been hit off-screen by Danny’s guitar, came back into view a moment later, holding Danny Verlaine.

“Detective Verlaine’s son,” Lou Ortiz announced to those gathered in the conference room.

“And where’s Verlaine at this point?” Chief Hawkins asked.

Ortiz hit the *Pause* button, then faced the Chief through the chiaroscuro light.

“Apparently only one of the cameras covering the dance floor was operative,” said Ortiz somewhat apologetically.

“And Verlaine was in the area covered by the other one?” Chief Hawkins asked.

“Afraid so.”

“What about Benton and Bishop?” the Chief inquired.

“Same,” Ortiz replied.

“Keep going,” Chief Hawkins ordered with a frown.

Ortiz hit the *Play* button, and on the TV screen Torres grabbed his wounded shoulder.

“There!” shouted Ortiz. “He’s hit!”

Instantly Danny could be seen breaking free from Torres’ grip.

“And there’s Verlaine now!” Ortiz exclaimed, using a pointer to show Verlaine entering the frame on the TV with his gun hand extended.

“Looks to me like he’s firing amidst civilians with insufficient regard for them or for department regulations,” commented Chief Hawkins.

“Chief, please...” Ray Salinas started to say, only to be cut off by Verlaine, whose blood was boiling.

“Only after Benton turned the goddamn place into a firing range!” Verlaine exploded.

On the TV screen Torres suddenly doubled over in pain, then crumbled.

“That’s it,” said Assistant Chief Ortiz, who got up and turned on the lights.

“Since the tape is somewhat inconclusive...” Chief Hawkins started to say.

“Somewhat?” Verlaine interjected. “It shows zip! *Nada!* Nothing!”

Chief Hawkins glared at Verlaine, then addressed the others.

“What about witnesses?” the Chief asked.

“Conflicting stories,” answered Lou Ortiz with a shrug. “They were mainly kids.”

“Stoned kids,” Benton reminded them.

“Who were scared half to death,” added Lou Ortiz.

“And forensics?” asked Chief Hawkins.

“The perp took three bullets,” responded Lou Ortiz. “One apparently from Detective Benton, the other two, seemingly, from Detective Verlaine.”

Slouched in his chair, Verlaine stared daggers at Benton while the Chief scanned a folder.

“Then I guess,” said Chief Hawkins, “it comes down to the word of Detectives Benton and Bishop against the word of Detective Verlaine.”

“Chief,” stated Ray Salinas, rising to his feet in indignation, “that’s frankly unacceptable!”

Ignoring Salinas, the Chief faced Verlaine.

“I’m afraid your record doesn’t work in your favor,” Hawkins said.

“I object!” shouted Ray Salinas.

“This is not a court of law,” proclaimed the Chief.

“No shit!” Ray Salinas exclaimed.

“You’re getting on my nerves!” Hawkins told the attorney.

“And you’re forgetting my client’s multiple commendations!”

“I’m forgetting absolutely nothing,” countered the Chief, who turned again to face Verlaine.

“Were you drinking on the night in question?”

“I was off-duty,” Verlaine answered.

“I take it that’s an affirmative?”

Verlaine shrugged. “A couple of beers,” he said without any noticeable emotion.

Chief Hawkins lifted the paperwork in front of him.

“As well as at least three Tequila’s straight up,” said the Chief, “if the bartenders are to be believed.”

Verlaine winced. “I can handle it,” he murmured.

Frowning, Chief Hawkins put down the paperwork and glanced around the table before again facing Verlaine.

“Given the circumstances, I have no choice but to suspend you without pay pending future determination,” the Chief proclaimed.

“You know we’ll take this to the Union,” Ray Salinas informed him.

“I bet you will,” Chief Hawkins said wearily.

If Verlaine had been a churchgoer, it's possible that he would have found some sort of comfort or solace if not in his faith, then perhaps thanks to a conversation with a clergyman, or if necessary with whichever God (or god) he happened to believe in. If Verlaine had been a Buddhist, perhaps he would have meditated on impermanence and attachment, and in so doing alleviated, at least to some degree, his suffering.

Verlaine, however, had long since relinquished any claim to spirituality, except in the form of the Soul Stirrers and Five Blind Boys CDs that he listened to periodically. The world, as he saw it, was cruel, harsh, and uncaring -- a mirror, it seemed to him, of his own relentless journey through the obstacle course of life. It was only that which he could do himself -- that which he could accomplish through his own cunning, his own guile, his own effort, and his own determination -- that he was willing or able to trust. Yet stripped of his badge, with bitterness and resentment increasing with each passing day, and whatever sense of fair play left inside of him diminishing rapidly, Verlaine could not find a place for himself, literally or figuratively. He fumed, he paced, he cursed, then he made an attempt to bury himself in the saddest and most self-pitying music he could cull from his large collection: Charles Brown's "Driftin' Blues," Guitar Slim's "The Things That I Used To Do," Ray Charles' "Drown In My Own Tears," Nina Simone's rendition of "Trouble In Mind."

Those were songs Verlaine had been introduced to many years before by a friend, long since dead due to a drug overdose, who had forsaken classical music in the hope of becoming the white T-Bone Walker or Elmore James. It was that guy, who took to calling himself Dogtown Slim rather than his given name of Preston Fincher, who took Verlaine to the Parisian Room on La Brea, where they were almost invariably the only whites to see the likes of Charles Brown and Percy Mayfield. The same was true at Babe & Ricky's in Leimert Park, where they journeyed to see Mickey Champion and Joe Houston. And it was even more strikingly true

down in Compton at Verbum Dei High School, where the two of them journeyed twice a year for all-night sessions by Zydeco king Clifton Chenier. It was also Slim who led Verlaine to Lowell Fulson's original version of "Tramp," with a guitar rhythm that introduced the world to what became known as funk, as well as to the sadly overlooked music made by people like Professor Longhair, Archie Brownlee, and James Carr. The special knowledge they shared gave the Slim and Verlaine a swagger, a sense of being *in the know*, so that when others – meaning white people who considered themselves hip -- talked about a favorite Stones tune, the two of them could cite the original version, whether by Arthur Alexander or Don Covay. They were the ones who could invoke names like Wynonie Harris and Baby Washington, and who could allude to "Soothe Me" by the Simms Twins, or Big Maybelle's unforgettable version of "Candy." And even more important than being part of a special fraternity, of being cognoscenti, the music that they revered provided them, and others like them – guys who, after a fashion, went to *different* high schools together -- with a kind of solace during hard times, which for Verlaine came far too often.

But when even music that he long cherished, song after song that since his high school days had helped carry him through far too many trials and tribulations, proved insufficient to ease his pain, Verlaine gave up his effort at solipsism and reached out to his partner, Kenny Clarke with a phone call.

Though each man was vividly aware that Verlaine was imposing – Kenny Clarke had a girlfriend who, understandably and justly, begrudged any potentially free evenings together that he and she lost – it was also clear to both detectives that making such a request did not come easily to Verlaine, and therefore was a loud, clear, and difficult call for help.

Kenny Clarke proposed going to a ball game, or to a restaurant in the 'hood called Harold & Belle's, where they could savor some spicy Creole food then listen to a trio whose piano player had spent years assimilating influences as diverse as Bud Powell, McCoy Tyner,

and Ahmad Jamal. But Verlaine was in no mood to be among what he called *civilians*. So it was with some trepidation that Kenny Clarke agreed to meet his partner at a downtown gin mill that was frequented by off-duty cops.

To Kenny Clarke's surprise, the evening began fairly well, with Verlaine restricting himself to an occasional Mexican beer while the two of them left off steam thanks to a well-worn dart board toward the rear of the rundown place.

One game led to another, then yet another. But as the evening turned into night, Kenny Clarke got the sense that Verlaine's frame of mind was darkening, as though whatever demons had been caged inside of him were in the process of acting up, and therefore far too likely to emerge at some point or other.

In the hope of avoiding trouble, Clarke suggested a pre-emptive run over to Chinatown for a bowl of *jook*, the rice porridge also known as *congee* that had sustained them through many long nights and early mornings. When that proved to hold no appeal, Clarke offered to spring for *samgetang*, the soup with a baby chicken filled with sticky rice and ginseng that they often ate at Mountain Café in Koreatown, or alternatively a Tommy's burger on Beverly, even though he knew that downing a couple of those always had the same effect on his intestinal tract as swallowing an anvil. All were places, as was true with El Huarache Azteca in Highland Park, and both Yasmin, with its Malaysian fare, and 101 Noodle Express with its *Shandong* beef rolls, in the San Gabriel Valley, that Verlaine and Clarke had long joked about including in a book they had for years threatened to write: *COPS COPPING DINNER – WHERE POLICE IN THE KNOW, AND OTHERS, CHOW DOWN IN L.A.* That never-yet-written book, they often playfully boasted, which would also include spots as diverse as Javan for Persian specialties like *Tahdig* with *Fesanjin* sauce plus the lamb and eggplant stew called *Badamjin*; Le Saigan for *pho* and *bun*; and Awash on Pico for Ethiopian specialties – but never high ticket items like

Matsuhisa or Melisse, or anything owned by Wolfgang Puck -- would one day be their ticket to radio and TV, which in turn would lead them to celebrity status and, if not fame and fortune, at least loads of free eats.

But on the night in question, not even favorite dishes at his preferred off-the-beaten-track joints proved to be a sufficient lure for Verlaine, who demanded one last game of darts, *double or nothing*. Out of pique, Kenny Clarke announced that since Verlaine insisted, he was going to teach him a lesson. Lo and behold, Kenny Clarke proceeded to do just that, focusing harder, and playing even better, than usual.

And when, with a slim chance at victory on the line, Verlaine missed the bull's-eye with his last dart, Kenny Clarke shook his head in mock pity.

“Tough break, Mikey baby,” Kenny said, tossing his last dart skillfully, then grinning from ear to ear when it hit dead center.

“And the new winner is...” Kenny Clarke started to say, only to wince when Verlaine surprised him by pulling out the Glock .45 he carried when off-duty, then blasting the winning dart to smithereens.

At the sound of the shot, instantly a half dozen off-duty cops leaped to the ready, aiming a veritable arsenal in Verlaine's direction – until, that is they realized that the shooter was one of their one, and that Verlaine was indeed holding his hands up in mock surrender.

Laughing, the off-duty cops shook their heads and re-holstered their guns, but the beefy no-nonsense owner-bartender, an ex-narc named Pete Ramos, was nowhere near as amused or forgiving.

“Mike, what the fuck!” Pete Ramos yelled as he approached angrily, ready to impose a sentence of eternal banishment.

Before Verlaine could say or do anything, however, Kenny Clarke hustled up to Ramos and slipped him some greenbacks.

“It’s under control, Pete,” Clarke said softly but convincingly.

To prove his point, Clarke placed an arm around Verlaine and led him over to a table where two other detectives were nursing beers, a black guy named Moore and an older guy named Yamaguchi.

“I hate fucking losing!” Verlaine announced as he sat down.

“That’s what makes you a great detective,” Kenny Clarke responded.

“Mikey-boy gets his teeth in a case, he’s a fucking bulldog,” Yamaguchi affirmed.

“How many you close this year?” Moore asked.

“Seven of eleven.”

“Average like that gets you into the Hall of Fame,” Moore commented admiringly.

“Fuckin’ Benton,” said Kenny Clarke. “He’s had a hard-on since the Sullivan case.”

“That where the old lady was fuckin’ her son?” asked Moore.

“That wasn’t Sullivan,” Yamaguchi said, seeking, then a moment later coming up with, the correct name of the case in question. “That was Stevenson.”

“Sullivan was an insurance scam,” offered Clarke. “Benton closes what he claims is a suicide, but Mike reopens it.”

“Turns out sweet, church-going Mrs. Sullivan faked the whole thing for insurance,” Verlaine explained.

“So Mike, here, gets tons of ink...” Moore began.

“While our boy Benton loses a promotion,” Yamaguchi concluded.

Noticing something through the corner of his eye, Moore suddenly frowned. “Speaking of scumbags...”

All four detectives turned to see Benton and Bishop enter, then head over to the bar and grab empty stools.

“Whatd’ya say we hit another joint,” said Kenny Clarke, sensing trouble. “This one’s

starting to smell.”

“In a minute or two,” Verlaine answered.

Seeing Verlaine stand, Kenny Clarke reached out an arm to restrain him. But Verlaine shook him off, then strode toward the bar, immediately raising the electrical charge in the room to a dangerous level, especially when Benton turned to face him.

“Buy you a drink, Mikey babes?” Benton asked with a combination of smugness and disdain.

Quickly, both Pete Ramos and Kenny Clarke scurried toward Verlaine in the hope of averting what looked to them like the prelude to a brawl.

“Mike...” urged Ramos.

“He ain’t worth it...” counseled Clarke.

To their surprise, Verlaine seemed to yield to reason.

“You’re right,” Verlaine said. “There *is* a smell.”

A collective sigh of relief could be felt as Verlaine started to turn away. But the relief proved to be short-lived, for with lightning speed Verlaine spun and nailed Benton with a right to the jaw that sent him flying off the bar stool!

Instantly all hell broke loose as John Bishop leaped onto Verlaine, Kenny Clarke jumped onto Bishop, and Pete Ramos propelled himself on top of all of them!

A light rain was falling when out from the gin mill stepped Verlaine, more bruised than ever in both body and spirit. Angrily, he started to trudge toward his Cherokee when out the door burst Kenny Clarke.

“Mike, wait for Chrissake!” Clarke yelled. “Leave your car, and I’ll drive you!”

But Kenny Clarke’s plea was to no avail as Verlaine climbed into the Cherokee, slammed the door, then floored the gas pedal to such a degree that it caused the Jeep to skid on

the newly-dampened pavement.

With the storm coming down harder, then harder still, Verlaine drove over the rain-slicked streets like a cowboy, bouncing over potholes, taking turns on two wheels, and nearly wiping out a couple of drunken homeless guys who, despite their alcoholic half-stupor, still managed to recognize what was clearly an accident waiting to happen.

Blasting Solomon Burke's version of Sam Cooke's "A Change Is Gonna Come" as loud as his sound system would allow, Verlaine reached over to the glove compartment and pulled out a bottle of Tequila. With his mouth, he unscrewed the cap, which he spit onto the passenger seat beside him, then took a huge swig before turning onto the Harbor Freeway.

Though the downpour made driving and visibility difficult and dangerous, Verlaine dealt with the freeway as though it were the Grand Prix circuit, weaving, swerving, and cutting both through and around traffic at ever-increasing speeds.

His adrenaline pumping at record levels, Verlaine started to take another hit from the pint of Tequila, then was startled by the sound of a siren. That piercing sound, in turn, caused him to peer into his rearview mirror, where he found the unmistakable sight of flashing red lights from a Highway Patrol car hot on his tail.

Too far gone to allow reason to prevail, Verlaine responded not by pulling over as a rational being would, but instead by flooring the gas pedal – a move that nearly caused him to lose control on a freeway surface made perilous by the interaction of precipitation with several weeks' residue of accumulated oil spill.

Barely managing to avoid crashing into the center divider, Verlaine found himself not merely undeterred, but strangely even more determined. That meant that instead of pulling over, the chase was on!

With no visible concern for life, limb, or other drivers, Verlaine drove like a man

possessed, pumping the gas, switching lanes, cutting off other vehicles, and causing a cacophony of angry horns to blast here, there, and everywhere!

Yet always on his tail remained the Highway Patrol.

Then suddenly, Verlaine caught his pursuer off guard by shooting across four lanes of traffic towards an exit ramp.

Feeling euphoric thanks to losing the Highway Patrol car, but still maintaining speeds far too dangerous for such a treacherous night, Verlaine sighed with relief as he at last wheeled the Jeep down Gaffey Street into San Pedro, then swerved suddenly at the sight of a broken-down truck blocking two lanes on a curve just a short distance ahead.

Whether it was a tribute to his reflexes, or simply thanks to a miracle, Verlaine managed somehow to avoid what seemed like a certain collision. But in the process, his car went into yet another skid!

Though he wrestled fiercely, ferociously, valiantly with the steering wheel in the hope of righting things, Verlaine sensed, despite the mixture of alcohol, adrenaline, and rage still coursing through his body, that his luck was about to run out.

A split-second later, Verlaine's wild night ended when the Cherokee slammed into a wall!